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THEATER

Duxbury Clipper

An Actress of Great Exertion

By TONY KELSO

High summer and Duxbury Bay covered in sailboats are reminders of the town's most famous theatrical resident and summer sailing enthusiast, Fanny Davenport. She was born Fanny Lily Gypsy Davenport in 1850 in England to parents who were both actors. In fact, all six of her siblings also took to the stage. Her most famous brother was Harry Davenport, who was a character actor in many movies such as "Meet Me in Saint Louis."

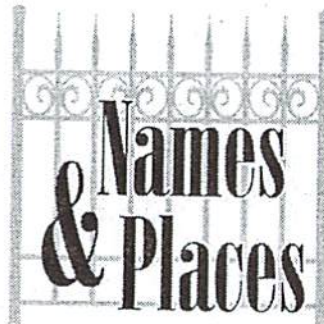
Fanny Davenport was one of the most renowned actress-managers of her day, similar to Sarah Bernhardt. She created and controlled her own productions, with her most famous roles being those written by Sardou, such as Fedora, La Tosca and Cleopatra. These roles were melodramatic heroines of great beauty and emotional intensity who also were fortunately able to wear many beautiful costumes. She performed these plays not with

tremendous inspiration but through "great exertion." Otis Skinner once said of her, "She was never a great artist but she was a pleasant lady." In her later years she grew quite stout.

Her last role was Joan of Arc, and she is remembered in Duxbury as having trouble climbing onto her rehearsal horse made out of lobster pots when she practiced in her Duxbury boathouse.



The Fanny Davenport estate lay off Washington Street between Wadsworth and Shipyard lanes.



Fanny Davenport only summered in Duxbury for five years until her untimely death at age 48 in 1898. Her niece, Fanny Seymour Field, who many longtime Duxbury residents remember, said few residents knew her aunt Fanny at all. "She was happy keeping to her broad vine-covered porches and spent many happy hours on Duxbury Bay in her boat."

Fanny Davenport died in Duxbury in September 1898 of what was described as "an enlarged heart" and bronchitis brought on by exhaustion from her last financially unsuccessful production. It could also have been the shots of strychnine she was given while on tour in Chicago to over stimulate her heart. Her death was front page news in the Boston and New York newspapers, which described her life as slowly ebbing out like the tide near her summer home.

Her death was worthy of the best 1890s stage death scene. Her three sisters, a brother and her beloved Melbourne were by her bedside along with three doctors hovering nearby, including Duxbury's Nathaniel Noyes. On the night of her death thunder rolled and lightning flashed so vividly that people were reminded of her production of Cleopatra.

Unfortunately for Melbourne MacDowell, his wife's debts exceeded her estate, with creditors ranging from the doctors to jewelers and costume makers. The Duxbury estate was sold in 1902. For a time it became the Eagle Tree Inn and eventually the summer home of Margaret Metcalf, who started Westwinds Bookshop in Fanny's former carriage house. The core of Fanny's house still stands off Washington Street, greatly reduced in size and eye-catching bulk, shorn of its "happy Dutch and Norman effects."

What of Melbourne MacDowell? He went on to a successful career in the fledgling industry of silent pictures of the 1920s. He played older characters in flicks ranging from "The Love Pirate" to "The Bootleggers Daughter." He died in California at age 84 in 1941. Fanny Davenport's spotlight has long gone out, but for a short time in the 1890s Duxbury locals felt a star from the stage heavens had fallen in amongst them.

Besides the limelight, her other great love was her second husband Melbourne MacDowell, one of her leading men when she married him in 1889.

How did the MacDowells come to Duxbury? It is likely her sister, May Davenport Seymour, who was working in Boston at the time, first learned of Duxbury as a summer place. Fanny and Melbourne first came in the summers of 1891 and 1892. The sisters bought estates opposite each other on Washington Street in 1893, "where it was love at first sight" with the area. Fanny and Melbourne constructed a massive summer home called "Melbourne Hall" that was described once as "a happy combination of Dutch and Norman effects." It was one of the landmarks of the waterfront, and was the highest assessed house in Duxbury in 1895. The estate included a carriage house, boathouse and pier. Melbourne MacDowell was a good sailor and kept his yacht, the "Fanny D," at his pier. He was also the first commodore of the new Yacht Club that stood at the foot of Freeman Place.



Fanny Davenport was on stage all her life; as a two-month-old baby she was carried on stage by her mother.



Melbourne MacDowell was not only a stage and silent screen movie actor, he was also the first commodore of the Duxbury Yacht Club.